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Innovative Information Literacy Landscapes: Leveraging the Specialized Knowledge of LGBTQ+ Communities in Research and Practice

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Abstract: This paper examines how Knowledge School principles can help libraries develop a more nuanced understanding of how social and cultural differences shape knowledge production and dissemination within LGBTQ+ communities. I focus on information literacy (IL), in which practitioners teach individuals to seek, evaluate, and use information. IL can empower communities by enhancing education, confidence, and decision-making. However, libraries often approach IL from a deficit, skills-based perspective by envisioning communities as lacking the requisite knowledge to fulfill their information needs. As a Knowledge School, we need to move away from one-size-fits-all approaches to librarianship. Through research, we can understand how communities produce and disseminate know-ledge on their terms. Such understanding can open up new, inclusive, and relevant possibilities for community-oriented practice. In this paper, I offer a lens through which to see how this occurs within a Knowledge School.

Keywords: *information literacy, lgbtq, qualitative research*

Introduction

Libraries have a longstanding history of addressing their local communities' needs, often focusing on marginalized groups. Some of these groups do not use library services, spaces, and collections as much as librarians would like them to and understanding barriers to use has become a research challenge for the Library and Information Science (LIS) field (Hull, 2001). This observation applies to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ+)[1] communities, who often view the library as a relevant, yet disappointing resource (Hamer, 2003; Kitzie, 2017; Rothbauer, 2004).

In this paper, I address how the Knowledge School can help librarians to have a better understanding of social and cultural differences concerning knowledge production and dissemination within LGBTQ+ communities. I focus on a popular service, information literacy (IL), in which librarians teach individuals to seek, evaluate, and use information. IL can empower communities by enhancing education, confidence, and decision-making (Becvar & Srinivasan, 2009). However, libraries often approach IL from a deficit, skills-based perspective by envisioning communities as lacking the requisite knowledge to fulfill their information needs. This assumption positions librarians as expert authorities for what LGBTQ+ communities should know and how they should come to know it, rather than allowing communities to define this process.

As a Knowledge School, we need to move away from one-size-fits-all approaches to librarianship. Through research, we can understand how communities produce and disseminate knowledge on their terms. Such understanding can open up new, inclusive, and relevant possibilities for community-oriented practice. In this paper, I offer a lens through which to see how this community-

[1] While umbrella labels like "LGBTQ" are problematic (Gamson, 1995), they represent what participants often use to describe their identities. I use the plus sign to convey the variety and hybridity of alternate identity expressions of gender and sexuality.

oriented research and practice occurs within a Knowledge School based on my research of LGBTQ+ community members. I will first overview current approaches to IL, followed by an alternate approach informed by Lloyd's (2006) IL landscapes framework. I will then describe how I apply this framework in my research and conclude with recommendations for practice.

Current IL Definitions and Approaches

Library researchers have traditionally defined IL from a skills-based perspective (Kapitzke, 2003a, 2003b; Lloyd, 2006; Todd, 2000) as "a set of abilities requiring individuals to 'recognize when information is needed and have the ability to locate, evaluate, and use effectively the needed information'" (American Library Association, 2000). Researchers adopting allied approaches, such as critical literacy, new literacy, and multiple literacies have criticized this definition as being too removed from real-life contexts. Rather than considering singular literacy, these new approaches recognize that individuals develop multiple literacies shaped by what their communities define as legitimate and meaningful knowledge (Doherty, 2007; Elmborg, 2006, 2010; Johansson & Limberg, 2017; Lloyd, 2006; Špiranec & Kos, 2013).

This community-oriented approach to IL is well-suited to understanding how marginalized communities experience, use, and evaluate information. These communities exist outside of mainstream discourses, or socially and culturally shaped ways of understanding information and knowledge (Doherty, 2007; Freire, 2005; Pawley, 2003). For instance, traditional IL approaches emphasize the importance of evaluating source quality based on whether an individual can verify the source's claims elsewhere. However, verifiability is impossible for a transgender teen researching the effects of hormones because longitudinal studies demonstrating these effects do not yet exist

(Boghani, 2015). Even if such studies existed, this teen might claim to know more about being transgender than these sources based on personal experience (Merton, 1972).

To address the needs of marginalized communities, librarians must understand how everyday experiences shape how these communities create, seek, share, and use information (Lloyd, 2006; Pawley, 2003; Sundin, 2008; Todd, 2000). Such research unearths how individuals experience and use information and what activities they define as legitimate for establishing knowledge. These findings can then be leveraged by librarians to provide responsive services, collections, and spaces that give marginalized communities agency in producing and consuming information valuable to them.

Adopting a New Approach: IL Landscapes

My research adopts Lloyd's (2006) framework of IL landscapes, which is a community-oriented approach to contextualizing knowledge dissemination and production. Lloyd (2006) used the metaphor of a landscape to describe the opportunities, activities, and artifacts people encounter in their everyday lives that facilitate their learning and knowledge. We encounter a variety of landscapes – from the asphalt, concrete, and bustle of a large city to the grass, cool breeze, and blue skies of a quiet park. The way that these landscapes are structured and organized provide us with opportunities, or affordances, to access and engage with the landscape. Through affordances, we come to know the artifacts and symbols comprising the landscape and what meanings we can assign to them. I know, for instance, that I cannot lie on a picnic blanket and read a book during rush hour on a busy city block. Since landscapes vary, we need to establish different types of knowledge to understand the affordances of each and how to use their resources.

Lloyd (2006) identified three types of IL landscapes: education, workplace, and community. Since communities are diverse and vibrant, their landscapes are particularly complicated to describe and

characterize. Luckily, Lloyd (2006) provided a framework for understanding the ILs of all landscape types. Understanding these factors allows us to identify what skills are necessary to successfully navigate the landscape and get on with our everyday lives. The framework has the following characteristics:

- Information sources valuable to the landscape – these are social, textual, and physical
- Affordances offered by the landscape that facilitate IL
- Obstacles provided by the landscape that contest IL

Researching LGBTQ+ Communities

I applied this framework to my research with LGBTQ+ communities. Specifically, I asked 30 LGBTQ+ individuals about the roles information and knowledge played in their everyday lives when exploring, adopting, and negotiating their identities. I purposively sampled individuals between the ages of 18 and 38 because they likely self-identified their sexual and gender orientations in adolescence, and can, therefore, recall and articulate these experiences (Grov, Bimbi, Nanín, & Parsons, 2006; Savin-Williams, 2009). I recruited individuals based on convenience (e.g., by reaching out to local LGBTQ+ organizations) and asked them to contact others who might qualify and be interested in participating (i.e., snowball sampling). These sampling strategies captured the perspectives of individuals within local LGBTQ+ communities, such as six participants from Minnesota who were part of the same online meet-up group.

While I have used the word "community" when referring to people with similar characteristics, this term is fraught, particularly for LGBTQ+ people. LGBTQ+ communities and the larger culture legitimize certain identities more than others. For instance, in the US, same-sex marriage is now legal. However, there is no equal protection against discrimination under the law for transgender individuals

(Human Rights Campaign, 2018). This legitimacy also varies based on intersecting identity categories, such as race and class. For instance, transgender women of color experience the highest homicide rates compared to the rest of the transgender population (Human Rights Campaign, 2017). Despite these factors, interview participants often used the term "community" when describing their relationship to other LGBTQ+ individuals and, for this paper, this term best reflects their shared knowledge and information-related activities and skills.

I interviewed participants using a constructionist, semi-structured interview protocol. This approach empowered participants to define concepts like their identities, knowledge, and information, rather than me imposing such definitions on them (Hamer, 2003). Interviews averaged one hour. I audio-recorded and transcribed the interviews to maintain participant privacy, importing them into NVivo for analysis. I analyzed the interviews using emic/etic coding, which allowed participant accounts (emic) to inform theoretical codes from the IL landscapes framework (etic) (Miles & Huberman, 1994). After analysis, I sent a write-up of findings to participants, asking them to comment on how well findings reflected their lived experiences, i.e., member-checking (Cresswell, 2014).

Findings

To become knowledgeable within LGBTQ+ communities, individuals transition from practicing authenticity to practicing realness. I define authenticity as community and culturally-based expectations for how individuals "ought" to express their LGBTQ+ identities, such as having a particular hairstyle. Realness represents how individuals adopt more varied and hybrid identity expressions than what their communities and cultures expect of them and actively challenge these expectations (Goffman, 1963; Gray, 2009; Halberstam, 2005).

I will now summarize how my research participants navigate their community landscapes to move from authenticity to realness using lightly edited interview examples. I refer to participants using pseudonyms and their preferred identity labels and pronouns.[2]

Navigating Social and Textual Information in Mainstream Community Landscapes

Mainstream communities and the larger culture impose authenticity on participants from the moment they are born. As Jessica recalls: "[Until college] I never thought about my sexuality. [When] everyone's born, it's assumed that they're straight. I [too] assumed I was straight." In her account, Jessica provides an example of social information – people she interacts with and the assumptions they have about her sexuality. This social information shapes Jessica's knowledge of how she should behave within a given context. People whom participants consider as valuable information sources within mainstream community landscapes tend to be those closest to them, including parents and friends.

Textual information constitutes another significant source. Cultural elites like the media limit participants' access to information about LGBTQ+ identities. For instance, James explains why he did not initially know his female-to-male transgender identity existed:

> I knew that male-to-female existed, but I didn't know you could go the other way. I didn't think it was possible because female-to-male is just not as prevalent. You see a lot of movies about male-to-female, but you don't see a lot in media about female-to-male.

Based on his media engagement, James was aware of one authentic way to be transgender – being assigned male at birth, but personally identifying as female. He demonstrates his trust in media sources by describing how they shaped his knowledge of possible identity expressions. Sometimes,

[2] Not all individuals use "he/him/his" or "she/her/hers" pronouns, instead preferring "they/them/theirs" pronouns.

these expressions are stigmatizing. Per Autumn: “When I say ‘transwoman’ [there’s the association that] you’re going to end up as a prostitute, selling yourself behind dumpsters.”

Therefore, when participants enter into mainstream community landscapes, they experience a significant obstacle – the social and textual information sources they consider most accessible and trustworthy negate and constrain their avenues for learning about possible LGBTQ+ identities.

Locating Physical and Insider Social Information Sources Using Online Technologies

To circumvent this obstacle, participants relied on information accessed through their bodies and observed through others’ bodies, i.e., physical information. For instance, Mark did not realize that he identified as male until dreaming about it: “When I was dreaming, my identity was as male instead of female. That’s how I realized that something was off.” Mark’s dreams contradicted expectations of authenticity conveyed by social and textual sources. These experiences provided him with new knowledge about possibilities for self-identification.

As participants learn about their LGBTQ+ identities, they seek others with similar experiences. Since mainstream community landscapes often do not represent these insider social information sources, participants use online technologies to connect to these sources. Per Stefan:

> I go to [search engine] Google because that’s where people [are] writing. People who are writing on queer stuff are queer people, and you’re going to have an income and access problem. You’re going to find stuff on blogs, Tumblr [social network and microblogging site], [and] more niche sites because there’s not the access to publishing, to a research study, etcetera.

When engaging with insider social information sources, participants must learn to navigate new community landscapes with their own sets of affordances, practices, and artifacts. Such navigation can elicit positive feelings among participants if others validate their identities. Eva describes a Reddit [social news aggregation site] thread discussing drag identities as: “Helping me get my gay chops. I was able to talk about [my identity] so freely on Reddit.” Eva’s use of the phrase “gay

chops" suggests the importance of shared experiences and practices in fostering her learning about gay identities.

As participants learn about LGBTQ+ identities, they document their knowledge. Online technologies afford this documentation. For instance, Cole uses YouTube to create videos about feminine masculinity and act as an insider social information source for others:

> I did [my YouTube channel] about gender presentation, and topics I didn't feel were being covered. People started commenting and asking, "What do you think about this?" [It] helped me [to] re-watch [the videos and] be like, "I've totally evolved past this."

As Cole learned more about the IL landscapes of LGBTQ+ communities, she could identify and address their knowledge gaps based on her own experiences. YouTube provides her with a video medium to document these experiences and a platform to reach an LGBTQ+ audience. Cole not only acts as an insider social information source for others but also for herself by re-reading her past experiences based on her current, embodied knowledge.

Deciding What Knowledge is Legitimate within LGBTQ+ Communities

When learning about LGBTQ+ IL landscapes, participants prioritize information sources and artifacts collectively valued by others sharing their experiences. Jamie explains why he values information from a Tumblr forum for transgender men: "It wasn't a doctor who knew nothing about [being transgender] giving you advice, it was people already living it." Jamie's preference for insider social information sources over medical professionals reflects his move from authenticity to realness. By experiencing being transgender and learning about this identity from others, Jamie recasts doctors as knowing nothing about the more hybrid, varied possibilities for LGBTQ+ identity-related information and knowledge.

However, community-based decisions of which knowledge is legitimate and who is knowledgeable are not static, nor uniform. For instance, Stefan details their experience with a variety of LGBTQ+ communities on Tumblr:

> Truscum are trans people who believe you have to have dysphoria to be trans. You can't be non-binary, you can't be genderqueer. You have rad femmes who may be lesbians, but they believe trans women are men. You have people who are like, "You're doing queerness wrong." Really? There's one true path to queerness, and I'm doing it wrong? You get one platform and have so many different opinions that there's gonna be people that make you mad.

This judgment of whether people are correctly doing their identities suggests that even within community landscapes including a greater variety of LGBTQ+ identity-related information and knowledge, authenticity remains a necessary practice. Jamie further describes specific practices characterizing authenticity:

> After a while, I started trying to go about [exploring a transgender identity] by [asking], "How do I do this right?" I'm very different from a lot of trans guys that I know and have talked to. I'm not out there with it. I'm more laid back. A lot of people have issues getting jobs and stuff, and I haven't. Even with "coming out." Am I doing it right? I did try and figure out a right way to do [my transgender identity], a wrong way to do it. Eventually, I realized my way was the right way for me, even if it wasn't the right way for somebody else.

Some of the authentic practices Jamie identifies are being "out there with it" regarding his identity expression, experiencing a shared set of barriers like "hav[ing] issues getting jobs," and disclosing his identity to others by "coming out." While Jamie initially conformed to these practices, he decided over time that they did not fit with his physical knowledge, informed by his everyday experiences of being transgender. Instead, Jamie ultimately practices realness by adopting a transgender identity while simultaneously rejecting certain assumptions associated with this identity made by LGBTQ+ communities.

Practicing Realness – Does it Shut off Knowledge Production and Dissemination?

Participants face an obstacle when practicing realness produced by the high value they place on physical information. If participants define knowledge as legitimate solely based on whether they have personally experienced it, this definition can shut off information sharing and exchange (Merton, 1972). However, findings suggest that participants recognize this obstacle and become skilled at approximating information provided by textual and social sources to their own, unique experiences. Consider Rihanna's description of how she evaluates information related to queer identities:

> What I look for is a depth of analysis and the ability to hold contradiction. An ability to see how queer experiences [are] intertwined with lots of things like historical contexts and class politics. [The] kind of stuff I look for is not just a description that seems very closed or self-contained about someone's experience or way of being in the world, but is able to say something or do something or show something that acknowledges complexity and opens up other questions.

Rihanna's account provides an example of how LGBTQ+ communities define IL: the ability of individuals to negotiate both authenticity and realness when evaluating information and integrating it as knowledge. In this definition, authenticity and realness go hand-in-hand. People cannot just rely on their embodied experiences to learn about LGBTQ+ identities. They must establish a shared understanding of what these identities mean to adopt them in the first place. Therefore, participants must practice authenticity to develop realness. To negotiate between authenticity and realness, participants must evaluate information based on how their community landscapes construct authenticity and transform how they see the world to advance their communities' understanding of identity and possible identity expressions (Freire, 2005; Johansson & Limberg, 2017; Pawley, 2003). These practices align with those highlighted within critical IL approaches, suggesting that participants are not information illiterate, but instead are experts in navigating their unique community landscapes.

Next Steps: Bridging Research Findings with Practice

To summarize, research findings denote the following:

- Participant reliance on physical information
- Participant reliance on social information, both insider and outsider
- Lack of connection between textual information and lived everyday experiences
- Affordance of online technologies to connect with communities and create knowledge
- Authenticity and realness as facilitating knowledge creation
- Authenticity and realness as constraining knowledge creation

Based on these findings, how can a Knowledge School engage in research that empowers communities to define their knowledge and needs, rather than imposing them? Also, how can a Knowledge School train librarians to develop responsive services, collections, and spaces that allow individuals to efficiently and meaningfully engage within their information landscapes?

Research-based Implications: Aligning the Research Story with Participants' Everyday Lifeworlds

Knowledge Schools should adopt the perspective that research is not neutral, nor objective. Our worldviews as researchers influence the questions we ask and how we answer them. Critiques of traditional IL approaches (see section on "Current IL Definitions and Approaches") exemplify a larger problem within LIS research: too often, we assume that our participants are non-knowers that librarians must connect to the "right" information, rather than competent creators of, and experts in, their own communities' knowledge base. In this way, we assume what librarianship should be, rather than opening up new possibilities for the profession based on community expertise.

As Knowledge School researchers, we can be accountable by recognizing our power over participants. We must commit to the communities we enter by learning about them before performing research and using their norms, languages, experiences, and histories to inform our data collection and

analysis. We can integrate participant feedback at multiple research stages by engaging in methods like verification interviews and member-checking. We can be accountable to our assumptions and how these feed into our research by practicing reflexive techniques like maintaining field notes and recognizing the limitations of our findings. Rather than just taking from the community, we should also weigh the benefits and burdens participants experience and become sustained community members rather than voyeurs. Finally, we must focus on the strengths and agencies of our communities, rather than positioning them as weak or lacking.

Practice-based Implications: Collaborating with Local Communities

In a Knowledge School, it is not enough to be informed by the evidence. We must also integrate our research findings into practice by training librarians to recognize the power inherent in their role as information gatekeepers (Doherty, 2007; Elmborg, 2006, 2010; Pawley, 2003) and providing them with strategies to counteract this power imbalance. The nature of this training should continuously change as we learn more about the needs, practices, and knowledge of our communities. Below, I offer some research-based suggestions for how Knowledge School librarians can improve services, spaces, and collections for LGBTQ+ communities.

For services, librarians can partner with community organizations, such as LGBTQ+ centers, to support events that may exceed the latter's scope or resources. As a volunteer at a local LGBTQ+ center, I assisted with fundraising for a queer and transgender person of color meditation group. This fundraising was necessary to help the group pay rent to the LGBTQ+ center where they met monthly. If these individuals could use free space at the library, it would not only provide an invaluable service but would also get those who may be non-library users into and engaged with the library.

In prior LIS research, the practice of information creation has been relegated to elites, such as academics, the media, and information professionals (Koh, 2013). Librarians can adjust this imbalance

between themselves and their local communities by empowering them to create and disseminate knowledge. For instance, librarians could provide LGBTQ+ individuals with authorship resources, including printing, video, and image equipment, as well as resources on how to disseminate their knowledge products, such as marketing classes.

From a collection development perspective, librarians should look for information sources that as Mary suggests, “tell a lot of stories.” Telling a lot of stories recognizes the complexities of any identity category as opposed to supporting the perception that there is only one way to *be* that category. Since my research findings denote the initial importance of outsider social information, making rich depictions of LGBTQ+ identities visible to all library patrons is crucial to engendering a more informed flow of information from mainstream communities about LGBTQ+ identities. Librarians can create online spaces for LGBTQ+ people who may not have physical access to affirmative resources. Research findings indicate the importance of online technologies for participants, in part because these technologies facilitate information access, but also because they allow LGBTQ+ communities to disseminate knowledge in the form of blogs, online forum posts, videos, etcetera. Librarians have the opportunity to centralize this knowledge within a digital space, where LGBTQ+ individuals can go to hang out and share information. Librarians should create these spaces with community input, such as social tagging.

Librarians cannot expect to engage LGBTQ+ communities by upholding IL landscapes that exclude them in the first place. They must look not only at those who come into the library but also at local communities who do not make regular visits and figure out why. For instance, in my state of South Carolina (SC), reparative therapy is legal. As a result, some SC libraries may own books supportive of this view. If someone questioning their sexuality sees this book in the library, they may view it as an unwelcome space. As a Knowledge School, we must continue to inform librarians that

libraries are not neutral. A library choosing not to make an LGBTQ+ Pride display because it may be too "political" constitutes an inherently political decision of who gets to be visible within a library space. We must train librarians to recognize the history of librarianship as rooted in social justice work and to elevate the voices and experiences of those most disenfranchised.

All of the examples I have provided have one fundamental assumption in common: the purpose of the librarian is not to instruct, but to facilitate dialog (Freire, 2005; Lankes, Silverstein, & Nicholson, 2007). This assumption puts librarians on equal ground with LGBTQ+ communities. Neither group has a knowledge-related deficiency; instead, they are knowledgeable about how to navigate information within their IL landscapes. Therefore, the relationship between librarians and LGBTQ+ communities should be to leverage the specialized knowledge of each – LGBTQ+ communities in providing librarians with information on the terrain of their IL landscapes and the librarian in facilitating active and meaningful engagement within these landscapes. Such an approach provides a crucial means for marginalized groups, including LGBTQ+ communities, to exercise agency by having their voices included.

Conclusion

In this paper, I provide examples of what research and practice could look like in a Knowledge School using the framework of IL landscapes to assess the information needs and knowledge of LGBTQ+ communities. The Knowledge School has the potential to advance the role of libraries as community anchors that collaborate with local communities to leverage their specialized knowledge and represent this knowledge in services, collections, and spaces. By positioning communities as having knowledge that the library needs, rather than the opposite, the Knowledge School can empower those around them and reshape the future of libraries and librarianship.

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